

Workload Overload: Knowing When and How to Ask for Help at Work

By Accountemps

The ability to “grin and bear it” when stress mounts is a positive attribute in the business world. As a result, many professionals feel uncomfortable asking for help when they’re feeling overloaded; they don’t want to risk having their boss or coworkers view them as someone who cracks under pressure.

However, failing to speak up when you know you’re in over your head can lead to issues far more damaging than image problems: burnout, blown deadlines, sloppy work, unhappy clients and eroded trust with colleagues, among others. Following are some tips for addressing the issue of “workload overload” proactively with your manager:

- **Request input on how best to prioritize tasks.** Your boss may not know how full your plate is — or if she does, she may have thought everything was fine because you hadn’t asked for assistance. Help her visualize your workload by making a list of ongoing projects grouped by priority. Have your manager confirm that you’re focusing on the most important tasks according to business needs, and then discuss whether deadlines for those assignments are realistic. Ask for her guidance in prioritizing lower-priority tasks as well, so you can plan ahead appropriately for when those items will become top priorities.
- **Ask to delegate some responsibilities.** Once you’ve determined which projects require immediate attention and when other workload spikes are likely to occur, work with your manager to identify tasks that only you should handle based on your role or expertise. Then evaluate the remaining items on the list. Are there responsibilities that could be assigned to another colleague temporarily? Could you team up with another employee to ensure deadlines are met? (A word of caution: Make sure this exercise doesn’t result in a coworker being “dumped on,” or you risk earning that person’s resentment.) Finally, if one or more colleagues step in to help you meet your deadlines, don’t delay in expressing your appreciation.)
- **Consider bringing in outside resources.** If, after discussing workload demands with your manager, it becomes clear that no one in-house is available to support you — whether it’s because they lack time or don’t possess the right skills or expertise — you may want to consider engaging temporary professionals. Leading firms often hire interim employees to prevent core members of their accounting and finance teams from workload overload.

If you’re worried about losing face by asking for help, remember that missing a major deadline likely will be more damaging, both to your psyche and your team’s results. The best thing to do when your workload balloons past the point where you can manage it is to put the business first and ask your boss to help you find practical solutions that will keep projects on track – and you performing optimally.

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